

**PRIDE
2019**

MAINTAINING COMMERCIAL VIABILITY AS A FOOTBALLER AFTER COMING OUT



A report for LGBTQ+ footballers, coaches,
youth academies and sports agents.





PERCEIVED PROBLEMS

FOOTBALL

Giroud: 'It's impossible to display homosexuality in football'

BENOIT TES
REU

To debunk the myths surrounding homosexuality's total incompatibility with football, the report addresses:

P3 / HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Why did corporations first look toward sports?

P4 / FOOTBALL'S QUEERNESS

How to frame football as essentially queer?

P5 / WESTERN CELEBRITIES

How does the western media apparatus work?

P6 / GLOBAL MARKET

How to preserve a global celebrity appeal?

P7 / NEW ESTHETICS

How has football transformed esthetically?

P8 / MASCULINITY

How have masculine celebrities done it?

P9 / GOSSIP & SOCIAL MEDIA

How is gossip good in a social media age?

P10 / TIME AND RE-POSITIONING

Which re-positioning tactics to learn from?

COMING OUT: COMMERCIAL DEATH SENTENCE?

Though times have changed and sexuality rights have boomed across Europe since the turn of the century, little progress has been made within the continent's favorite sport, football. As of 2019, none of the 500 or so players in the English Premier League identify as LGBTQ+. In a time when homophobia is punishable as a hate crime in 22 of the 28 EU states, this report addresses another hinderance to a footballer's desire to come out - commercial viability. Cristiano Ronaldo amasses a whooping 47 million dollars in product endorsements alone. How to reconcile a footballer's fluid sexuality with their consistent media brand?

Historical Overview

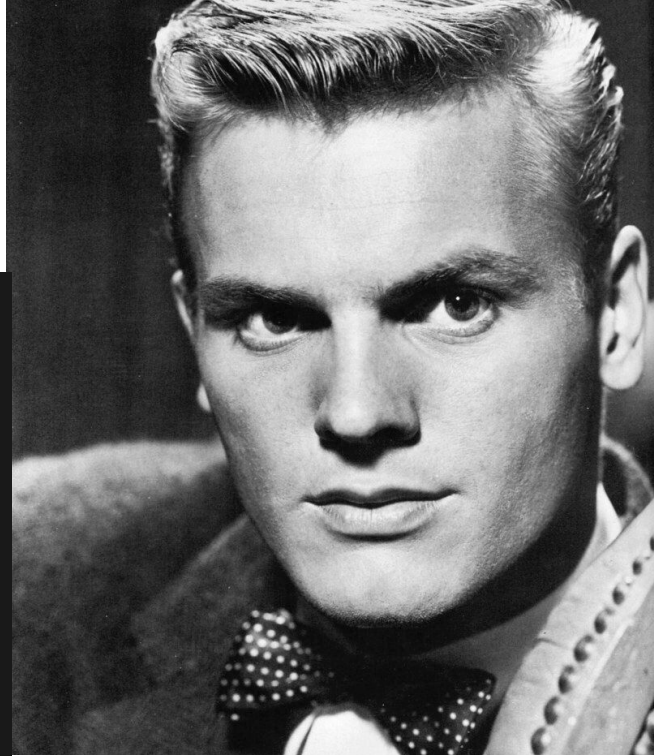
W.G. Grace (cricket), Gwyn Nicholls (rugby) and Ted Sloan (jockey) were among the first sports stars leveraged to boost newspaper sales around the turn of the 20th century. The boom of film in the 1920s, however, lured en masse corporations toward the public image of sports stars.

"The increasing complexity of society itself generated a responsive to the sporting star as a 'compensatory hero', providing the dream of a means of vaulting over the slow mechanisms of social advancement." (Krieken, 2012)

To what extent has this golden narrative about footballers changed with time? Considering the popularity of rags to riches stories about Latin American footballers, from Maradona to Neymar, queer footballers are encouraged to understand the main driving force behind their media appeal.

"Praise me because I am unique, but praise me as well because my uniqueness is only a more intense and more public version of your own." (Braudy)

If Shakespeare was right that the world is a stage, another historical anecdote to learn from is Master Betty, a 19th century acting prodigy. There were calls to investigate whether he was biologically male or female. His successful play with sexual ambiguity would become a blueprint for media appeal in future generations. (Kahan, 2010).



Netflix's *Tab Hunter Confidential* sheds light on the actor's struggle navigating Hollywood as a gay man. Though rumors of his arrest for "disorderly conduct" were sparked as early as 1955, the actor (above) would continue to land roles as America's most beloved, clean-cut family man. Note the bow tie.

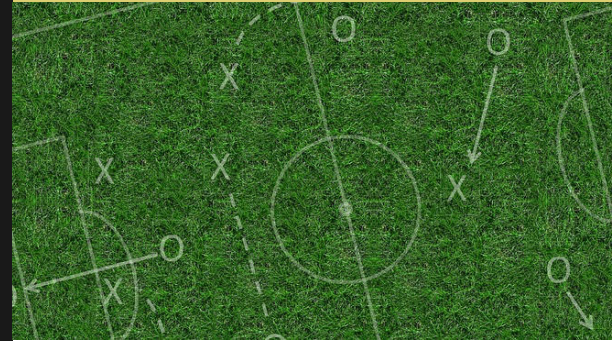
Such an orderly media persona, the actor revealed, was more at odds with the rising youth and rebel culture of the 50s and 60s, which favored more morally-questionable characters. An example is James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause*, a testament that celebrity culture, and its endorsements, follow the mood of the time.



Football's Queerness

"Like music and theatre, sporting events are a vehicle for the expression and manifestation of powerful emotions which have no other outlet in everyday life, adding drama to everyday life and social interaction, and constituting a core narrative of how one leads one's life, overcomes adversity and obstacles, and manages ethical dilemmas." (Krieken, 2012).

A lack of outlets amid powerful emotions. Adversity. Ethical dilemmas. A description of sporting events that can almost be mistaken for an analysis of the queer experience. The relationship between football and queerness has been belittled without proper attention to their conceptual similarities. If concise news headlines require cohesive narratives, the parallel between physical and mental struggle is an avenue that queer footballers are encouraged to look toward.



Defense or offense, pressing forward or conceding control on purpose. Tactics in football are filled with homoerotic echoes. In 2010, even masculine archetypes Gerard Pique and Zlatan Ibrahimovic were rumored to have had a 'hot moment' in a private picture caught of them. The fact that Pique is a defender and Ibrahimovic a striker could partially explain the virality of the picture - imagery of power struggle familiar to football fans. Striker here, striker there... so what, right?

"Sports stars also help overcome the hero/celebrity opposition, because it is less arguable that they cannot demonstrate real achievement, as opposed to inauthentic fame." (Krieken, 2012)

Though coming-outs among pop stars have proliferated since the 2000s, these individuals are more threatened by their sexualities than footballers. Whereas music moguls may spare talent for media appeal, football coaches need good performances. This authenticity lends footballers a hero's attributes, rather than a celebrity's. Closeted pop stars who have had endless heteronormative songs penned for them are more at risk if they are merely seen as talentless celebrities. They cannot leverage from a footballer's mythical heroic traits, which trump minor personal characteristics in the eye of coaches and fans.



WESTERN CELEBRITIES

"Mass media in the West generally display a strong preference for an anti-determinist perspective, consistent with the emphasis in Western social and political thought on individual freewill and agency." (Krieken, 2012).

Footballers are caught in a celebrity culture that is mediated through a Western lens. This media apparatus, though addressed to a global audience, is ingrained in a tradition of reporting that prioritizes Hollywood good endings over tragedies, hopeful stories of hardship eventually redeemed than fallen heroes. Coming out is more and more inserting itself within this paradigm of freedom. This manifests beyond film and television - increased reporting on LGBTQ+ abuses outside the Western hemisphere, though myopic, has made queerness and its acceptance a condition for western ideals.

FIFA WORLD CUP RUSSIA 2018



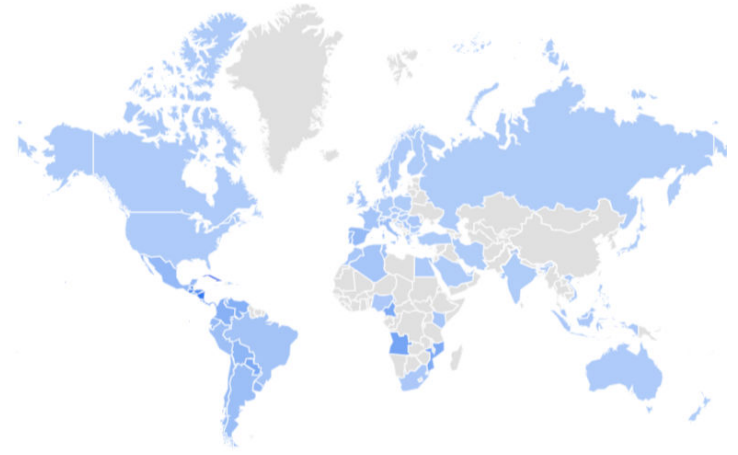
The 2018 World Cup in Russia has revived Cold War attitudes toward sports. Its call for boycott is reminiscent of similar rhetoric during the Olympics Games of the pre-1990 era. The increased antagonism between East and West has particularly claimed a human rights dimension, with gay rights appearing at the foreground in the EU's handling of Poland and in the World Cup's inability to turn a blind eye to persecutions in Chechnya. Gay footballers in Western countries are therefore part of a microcosm from a larger political context. Coming out would not be standing against the canon - if anything, it is ironically welcomed on both sides of the divide since it is employed as a political device. The more queerness is normalized, the less easy it is to politically manipulate it.



Global Market

"Sports stars are especially effective at becoming global celebrities since the absence of a language dimension enable them to cross the boundaries of national celebrity frameworks." (Krieken, 2012)

Footballers ought to wonder about the roots of their global appeal. The absence of language barriers indeed strikes as a plausible explanation. The bond between footballers and their fans is therefore strengthened by the invisibility of national markers. Race, then, becomes a trickier identity to handle as a global brand because unlike sexuality, it is seen. To watch Mario Balotelli single-handedly send Italy into the 2012 Euro final is a testament that even racial markers can be overlooked in times of victory.



Cristiano Ronaldo has had his fair share of gay rumors, from potential boyfriend-holding to gay club-spotting. Who is obsessing about Ronaldo's sexuality? Conventional wisdom would normally put it this way: the third world is sexually repressed, the gays are in the West. This assumption, discredited by a myriad of decolonial studies scholars, nevertheless worries queer footballers about their sexuality's resonance abroad. Fortunately, according to Google Trends (above), among the top 20 countries which have googled 'cristiano ronaldo gay' in the past year, only three of them are Western - Spain, Portugal, and Italy. The rest are mostly Latin American countries and several African states as well. The quintessence of anti-West, Cuba, topped the ranking.



New Esthetics in Football

Sports celebrities can link their prominence in their particular field of endeavor with a variety of other types of concerns, such as health, fitness and youth." (Krieken, 2012).

The prime cultural resonances that footballers bring to the table - health, fitness, and youth - have remained unchanged since the sports' inception. What did change, however, is the way with which society constructs notions of health, fitness and youth. Prior to the 2014 World Cup, Slate released the article "Is Germany Too Nice to Win the World Cup?", which wondered whether the squad's fresh faces would live up to Germany's historical alpha male play. On average shorter and leaner, and drastically younger, the underestimated German team would go on to win the World Cup - sparking a discourse over new meanings of qualities in football. Such a discourse falls under the overall new esthetics of the game, which no longer mandates footballers, even German, to look robust and emotionless - lean bodies bring speed and flexibility, emotions bring intuitive play. The idea of having queer footballers is merely a byproduct and continuation of this new esthetic process.

Commercial opportunities are also following this shift in esthetics. Iniesta endorses Mikakus, a Spanish fashion brand whose shoes are more tailored to be worn in casual events or at the gym than on grimy football pitches. Harry Kane advertises for a razor firm and Lukaku for Abercrombie and Fitch. Eden Hazard, particularly, recently paused for Ice Watch with the banner "Time has changed" - the funky, colorful and youthful feel of the watch brand contrasts with earlier traditions of pausing for more 'masculine' silver-plated watches. The same banner has been used here for FIFA 17.



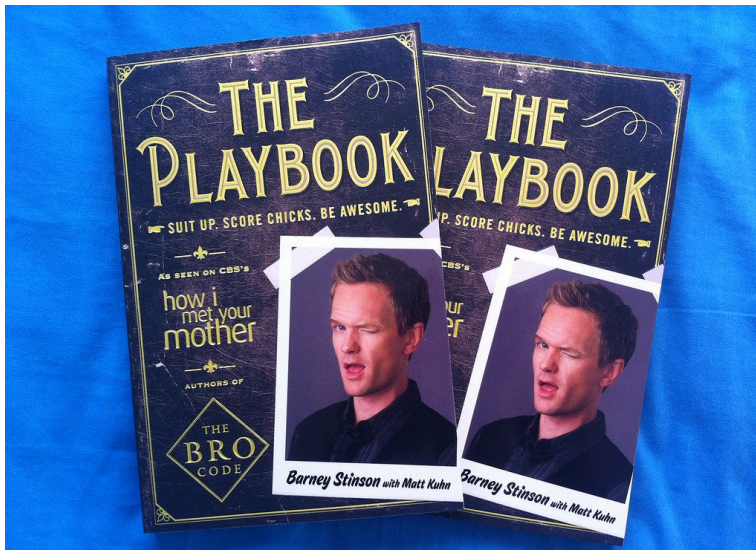
New esthetics come with new fetishes. The search 'football porn' increased by 113% during the 2018 World Cup according to BuzzFeed. Another fun fact - in the past year, more people have googled about Eden Hazard's butt than Gigi Hadid's.



Reconciling Masculinit(ies)

Sports stars have been adopted as powerful symbolic tokens to negotiate the so-called crisis in masculinity." (Rojek, 2006)

Footballers should understand that the world's reliance on their masculinity is tempered by the social conditions at work. This reliance is indeed a "negotiation" - depending on new esthetics in media portrayals, nostalgia, or a changing political context. A polarized world that equates the West with tolerance doesn't only mean that queer footballers are allowed into the game - masculinity itself becomes subject to change. From the ascendancy of the term metrosexual to calls of inclusion of men in feminist discourse, society is breaking masculinity into masculinities - various forms of male expressions that must conform to the social climate of the time; a more fitting sensitive and stylish version that may solidify itself as strongly as its machismo past.



Though Neil Patrick Harris came out as gay as early as 2006, his character on *How I Met Your Mother*, Barney Stinson, remained the central piece of the show and its straightest character too. The show lasted till 2014 and despite the seeming contradiction between sexuality and storyline, this has not stopped the release of *The Bro Code* in 2009, *The Playbook* in 2010, even a parents' version in 2012. "Suit up. Score chicks. Be Awesome." reads the playbook, and all versions aim for a straight audience. The perception of Neil Patrick Harris's masculinity is a blueprint for closeted footballers who fear that coming out would be off-brand.



After Anderson Cooper 'quietly' came out in 2012 according to CNN, *Forbes* immediately released the article 'Why Anderson Cooper's Coming Out Will Help His Brand'. Somewhat prophetic, Anderson Cooper's career would indeed take off, bringing him to mediate the presidential debate between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. This role, which is tainted with ideas of power intrinsic to masculinity, is further evidence of the malleability of queer media persona. Cooper's appearance on one of the most watched events in the US shows that coming out doesn't restrict a brand to only queer niches.

Gossip and Social Media

"[...] the eighteenth-century theatrical practice of flirting around the boundary between public and private lives, with the effect, regardless of whether it was the intention, of enhancing their capacity to attract and hold public attention." (Eltis, 2005)

In 2015, the Independent released an article criticizing Luke Shaw's defensive rebuke of gay rumors surrounding him at the time. Shaw's mistake however lies in a lack of understanding of gossip as a driving force for commercial appeal. Given that one is straight until proven otherwise, Shaw would have benefitted from flirting with ideas generated in gossip tabloids and online forums rather than seeking to extinguish them and face the fire. He was better off following the example of David Beckham, who was described in 2013 by CNN as "the man who broke the gay taboo in football." Google Trends data reveals that the world has always been somewhat suspicious of Beckham's sexuality, but the Calvin Klein model astutely flirted with these perceptions until pictures of him - or any footballer - in his underwear had become normalized.



Demi Lovato, and recently Taylor Swift, have masterfully controlled rumors surrounding their bisexuality. Their genius is not merely in refusing to rebuke these rumors - but in feeding the fire. Lovato's Cool for the Summer song had explicit same-sex motifs whereas Taylor Swift's latest single Me! played on ideas of self-love and self-confidence. Neither of them is yet to confirm their sexuality - but the flirting, besides its commercial benefits, is for some fans and critics enough of an answer.

"It is precisely an element of the hero's 'presentation of self' to deny that there is any strategy, that their heroism is entirely 'natural' and requires no synthetic support from the organization of their public perception." (Krieken, 2012)

Social media can be a strategic channel for queer footballers to come out. This can be partial through jokes and retweets, which not merely abate the flame but offer footballers the chance to control their own narrative and curate their own version of queerness. This natural outlet brings forth a level of authenticity that goes hand in hand with the idea of 'being one's self'.



Re-Positioning Tactics

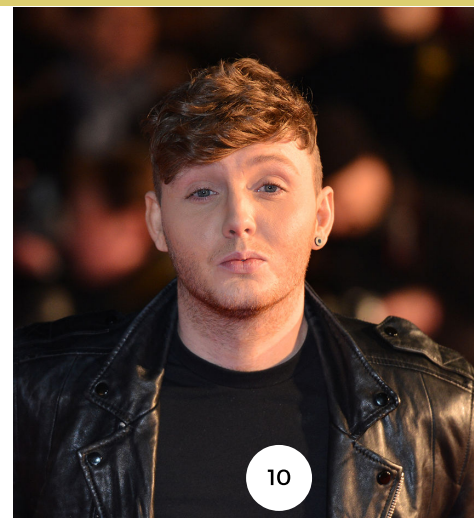
What to learn from the Kardashians?

The reality television show stars and their publicists could teach queer footballers some important re-positioning tactics in moments of change. There is a reason why viewers were deprived of seeing Kyle Jenner giving birth. The image she had up until then curated for her cosmetics brands - a sexy youthfulness - contradicts the perception of her as a mother. Similarly, Kim Kardashian's new aspirations to becoming a lawyer, and her advocacy for inmate releases, fall under a strategy that seeks to re-position the reality TV star as an entrepreneurial, smart and kind personality - an essential switch as she turns 40, an age that can no longer as effectively leverage from her previous body-related imagery.



The evolution of Miley Cyrus is a pertinent example of re-positioning. The genius of Cyrus is in her ability to shift from family-friendly Hannah Montana to R-rated Wrecking Ball star to Ms. Miley Cyrus-Hemsworth. The goal was to preserve the teenagers who had rooted for her as a Disney star and gain seriousness among adults. In 2015, Miley Cyrus came out as pansexual - a public announcement that was overshadowed by her Wrecking Ball shenanigans. In 2019, E! released an article on how Cyrus had embraced her former persona and was now enjoying the best of both worlds. This ability to embrace two contradictory personas should encourage queer footballers to see the cracks in-between and allow their dual selves to meet halfway.

In 2013, James Arthur was sucked into a controversy over homophobic lyrics. The singer disappeared from the limelight and eventually returned in 2016 with hit singles. These songs, morose and filled with regrets and heart-breaks, were part of an overall strategy to re-introduce an apologetic James Arthur who is ready to change. If homophobia itself can be re-vamped and re-positioned, what about homosexuality?





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In conclusion, this report finds that the dooms-day scenarios regarding a footballer's sexuality are largely exaggerated. A proper strategy and a reliance on a footballer's true assets - heroic physical qualities, youthfulness and the myth of making it from nothing - would not merely minimize the commercial damage of coming out as gay, bi, or queer but even open up new horizons, markets and possibilities.

Not every queer footballer may associate themselves with Ellen, who didn't know that breaking her silence in 1997 would eventually pay her off big time, literally. Some queer footballers may look toward Angelina Jolie, who identifies as bisexual but has opted to dedicate her media profile and charity elsewhere. With the social progress at works in the world, both in the West and the East, queer footballers will realize that the media and commercial apparatus more and more reflects them and needs their input.

Change is underway socially, but at a personal level, coming out does not necessarily change much about a footballer. It's their call.



For queer footballers seeking personal guidance and strategies,
contact team[at]boumerang.org



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Google Trends data collected on May 13, 2019. Pictures within report included under fair use. Views and analysis are the author's own.

